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ABSTRACT

Morry's Camp specifically serves low-income and at-risk New York City youth by providing a maintenance and prevention program focused on the camp community, youth development, and education. Campers attend for 4 years, and there is a "post-grad" program for those who have completed the 4 years. The camp has a year-round component in which staff travel to campers' schools to hold monthly programs with the campers. These programs include goal setting and life skills trainings. A study examined the match between the camp's objectives and the valued aspects of the camp experience as articulated by campers. Two focus groups were conducted with 24 campers of varied ethnicity in grades 6 and 7, and one focus group was conducted with 3 teenage female "post-grads" of African American and Latina descent. Findings indicate that Morry's Camp seems to be meeting its objectives when viewed from campers' perspective. Campers articulated the values and meaning of camp for themselves, and these values were aligned with the camp's four main objectives focusing on positive core values, increased social skills, enhanced self-esteem, and a sense of personal responsibility. The objectives were a conscious component of the camp program and a source of focused attention with campers. Recommendations are offered for carrying out camp evaluations and relating camp outcomes to youth development theory. (TD)

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Outcomes of Camping: Perceptions from Camper Focus Groups

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OUTCOMES OF CAMPING: PERCEPTIONS FROM CAMPER FOCUS GROUPS

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INTRODUCTION

Many people go to camp. For some campers, camp is a chance to make new friends, learn new skills, and enjoy the outdoors. For others, the camping experience is not so positive. What happens to children at camp? What are the desired outcomes of a camp experience? How do staff and camp administrators facilitate the attainment of these outcomes? These questions are at the core of almost every camp program currently offered.

In this age of accountability, camp administrators are encouraged to provide outcome data to support their claims regarding the value of the camp experience as well as document that goals are met. Board members, grant committees, agencies, and even parents want to see proof that camp is a positive experience for campers. Funders, particularly in the not-for-profit sector, often mandate this documentation. Agencies such as the United Way want to see data that confirm their money is used to obtain goals that benefit the community. Board members as well as camp directors recognize the value of both quantitative and qualitative data to assess their programming objectives and realize the need to use a variety of techniques to gather and interpret outcome data.

The Recreation and Leisure Studies Department at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) and Morry's Camp are working together to develop an evaluation research plan that blends appropriate measurement tools with assessing desired outcomes. Several methodological techniques are in place to gather qualitative and quantitative longitudinal data from Morry's Camp. This paper, however, will focus on one set of qualitative results gathered from three exploratory focus groups conducted with campers. The purpose of this paper is to describe the match between the camp's objectives and the valued aspects of the camp experience as articulated by the campers. Our intent is to offer camps interested in validating outcomes an example of one method of qualitative data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The paper also relates the Morry's Camp findings to the professional literature surrounding youth from at-risk communities, resiliency, protective factors, and youth development.

BACKGROUND

The Children's Defense Fund (2000) projected that in the year 2001, one in two children would live in a single parent family at some point during their childhood; one in three children were classified as poor; and one in three children were a year or more behind in school. The number of children in violent homes ranged from 30 to 60 percent, and the number of children that were not living with their birth parents was on the rise. The numbers imply that these youth may be at high-risk and face an uncertain future.

A challenge exists when discussing the number of youth at-risk since varying definitions of the term "at-risk" are common. Bembry (1998) categorized youth and communities into three main categories of low-risk, at-risk, and high-risk. Low-risk requires effective maintenance programs to stop youth progression to the next levels. At-risk requires prevention programs to provide an alternative to incarceration, and high-risk requires intervention programs. Morry's Camp specifically deals with low-risk and at-risk youth by providing a maintenance and prevention program focused on the camp community and youth development.

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Grayson (2001) realized the problem with multiple definitions and the characteristics of at-risk youth. He categorized youth at-risk according to the following characteristics: live in chronic poverty, go to a poor school, have poor school performance, are in a negative peer group, have poor social skills, use drugs or live with caregivers who use drugs, are a minority, and have a family situation characterized by stress. When children possess several of these characteristics they are more susceptible to sexual activity at an early age, drug abuse and alcoholism, or trouble with the law (Grayson, 2001).

Despite these facts, hope exists for these children. Not all youth from high-risk communities are destined to a life of drugs, crime, and failure. Researchers have shifted from a reactive approach of examining risks to a proactive approach of analyzing protective factors that create resilient youth. Lifton (1993) identified resilience as the human capacity of all individuals to transform and change, no matter what their risks. Resiliency is a pattern of successful adaptations following exposure to risk factors and stressful events (Public/Private Ventures, 1994).

Resiliency is a characteristic that can be developed. Witt & Crompton (1997) identified five key protective factors related to families, schools, and communities that lead to resiliency. The protective factors included supportive relationships with adults and mentors, student characteristics (such as self-esteem, motivation, and personal responsibility,) family involvement, community support, and academic success and training. Benard (1997) noted that teachers and mentors were the key to protective factors and developing resilience. Teachers can provide belonging, love, safety, respect, and meaning by developing caring relationships with the students, challenging the students with high expectations, and allowing student involvement and contribution. Resilience skills included the ability to form relationships (i.e., social competence), problem solve (i.e., metacognition), develop a sense of identity (i.e., autonomy), and plan and hope (i.e., sense of purpose and future) (Benard, 1997). Camp is an environment to foster these resilience skills and provide positive youth development.

Youth development at the most basic level has been described in the following way (National Youth Development Information Center, 1998):

> A process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent. Positive youth development addresses the broader developmental needs of youth, in contrast to deficit-based models that focus solely on youth problems.

Youth development includes not only the process of development but also the outcomes of development as well as the programs and organizations that focus on the non-academic outcomes offered in non-school hours.

Youth development experts have suggested a need to push beyond the current thinking about the exact outcomes, inputs, settings, strategies and actors needed to help young people address problems, build skills, and pursue opportunities for learning, work, and community contribution (Bembry, 1998; Pittman & Wright, 1991; Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2001). Researchers at The Forum for Youth Investment (Pittman et al., 2001) suggested several ways to broaden the agenda in youth development. For example, outcomes need to be broadened beyond school achievement and problem avoidance to include more intentionality of the positive expectations we have for youth, rather than just what we do not want them to do. A need exists to expand the inputs beyond a traditional approach of providing services. Young people need caring adults to help guide them and opportunities to learn and give back to their communities. These relationships and opportunities need to go beyond the quick "fix-it" services common in many youth development programs. Goals related to settings and times need to extend beyond school so resources and opportunities are available where they live, play, and learn with access to these supports at critical times other than traditional school hours. Perhaps the

greatest need is for young folks to be more than recipients of services. They need to have responsible roles in which to develop their skills and find motivation to address challenges they encounter.

Research that brings together the concepts of resiliency, youth development and the camp program gained momentum during the past ten years. Indications from the field are that camping professionals are transitioning from informal evaluations to formal outcome processes. More camps seemed focused on personal and interpersonal growth in campers related to goal setting, social competence, metacognition, and autonomy. Youth organizations such as 4-H, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, YMCA, Campfire USA, and the American Camping Association have long recognized the potential that exists to facilitate youth development and build resiliency through organized camping. These organizations recently added camper outcome measures in addition to their traditional basic site, staff, and program evaluations (Dworken, 2001). For example, 4-H camps in Connecticut sent open-ended surveys to campers and their parents focused on the influence of camp on the camper. These survey results were compared to the Search Institute's forty developmental assets necessary for healthy youth to document the areas where camps play a positive role in the development of their campers (Dworken, 2001; Search Institute, n.d.). These Connecticut camps were objective driven and proactive in dealing with campers' basic needs, their developmental processes, and fostering resiliency. The formal outcome measurement process served as a tool to ensure that their objectives were met.

The Morry's Camp Experience

For 30 years, Morry Stein was the owner and director of Camp Echo Lake. He was also a dedicated leader within the American Camping Association. Morry recognized the long-term impact camping made on the lives of upper-middle class youngsters and wanted to extend this opportunity to children of all socioeconomic backgrounds. He saw a need to help children be resilient to the challenges of growing up in high-risk communities and dreamed of a program that could lead these children toward positive youth development. Unfortunately, he died in a plane crash on October 31, 1994 and did not see his wish fulfilled. His dream, however, did not die, and dedicated friends and family members launched Morry's Camp in 1995. Morry's beliefs in the positive contribution to youth development is seen in the philosophy of Morry's Camp and the specific goals that center on fostering resiliency and positive youth development as evidenced by camper outcomes.

Morry's Camp conducts a variety of fund-raising events and gathers support from an active Board to provide a camping experience that is free of charge to selected girls and boys from diverse ethnic backgrounds from at-risk communities in the New York City area. Potential campers must meet specific requirements and undergo a competitive application process. The specific requirements necessitate that children do not have any other means of attending a camp program that they are performing up to their abilities in school, have parental /guardian support, and are not in trouble with law enforcement.

Morry's Camp operates a "4x4 program." This program entails coming to camp for four weeks with a guaranteed reservation for four years as long as the campers continue to meet the original requirements. Children go to camp for their first time as rising 5th graders and "graduate" the summer before 8th grade. The camp is composed of 2 four-week sessions that have approximately 100 campers in each session. Morry's Camp mimics an educational structure in that 5th graders are "freshman," 6th graders are "sophomores," and so on. The post-graduate (post-grad) program is the most recent program developed for "graduated" teenagers from the 4x4 program. The focus of the post-grad program is on developing leadership skills and finding jobs and learning opportunities for the post-grads within their communities. Education is the cornerstone of all Morry's Camp activities. The staff is focused on the camp's year-round objectives and plan programs accordingly. Campers enjoy traditional activities as well as all-camp read and education clubs that build on

academic objectives from the campers' school curricula.

A unique aspect of Morry's Camp is the year round component. Staff travel to campers' schools to hold monthly programs with the campers. These programs include goal setting and life skills trainings. The staff members discuss the older campers' specific career goals and help them find internship opportunities within their communities. One adolescent camper was interested in drama and fine arts, so the staff collaborated with a local group and got some interested Morry's campers involved with a local play. Campers are required to attend 80 percent of the monthly programs. In reality, they have approximately a 90 percent attendance rate at these meetings. The year round component and summer programs at Morry's Camp are specifically designed to address the camp's objectives to develop positive core values, increase social skills, enhance self-esteem, and develop a sense of personal responsibility. These goals were the initial focus of Morry's Camp, because they paralleled the findings discussed in the youth development research and corresponded to the personal beliefs of Morry and the camp administration.

The Camp staff and Board have consistently evaluated their programs to assure objectives were met, but recently have made a commitment to move beyond program-specific evaluations. The Camp has joined with a research team from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill to establish a longitudinal research study that will generate research information on aspects of youth development within a year-round program based on the camping experience. The first step was to document through a formal, systematic method that a match existed between the Camp's objectives and the valued aspects of the camp experience as articulated by the campers and, secondly, to situate these findings within the youth development literature in a way that could lead to the emergence of grounded theory.

METHODOLOGY

In February of 2001, the research team conducted three exploratory focus groups with campers. Krueger (1988) defined a focus group as people who possess certain characteristics and who provide qualitative data through a focused discussion. Focus groups are not the typical means of evaluation within the camping profession. These qualitative methods, however, can provide a rich data set and lead to a fuller understanding of people's perceptions and experiences (Henderson, 1991). Focus group interviews assess participant perspectives (Minnis, Holsman, Grice, & Payton, 1997; Morgan, 1988), provide an opportunity for in-depth explanations and detail, and allow for modification as unanticipated topics arise (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

The UNC research team conducted the focus groups at campers' schools. Morry's Camp administrators helped obtain parental consent from campers who attended the after-school monthly meeting scheduled for February 2001. Researchers set up three focus groups: two groups were composed of campers from the 4X4 program and one group was taken from the post-graduate (post-grad) program. The campers in the 4X4 groups consisted of "sophomores and juniors" who in reality were 6th and 7th graders. The one-hour focus groups were composed of twelve 4x4 campers from varied ethnic backgrounds including African-American, Latino/Latina, and European-American. The post-grad group consisted of three teenage females of African-American and Latina decent.

An interview guide was designed to elicit campers' perceptions of their camping experiences through a variety of open-ended questions. The questions were not focused specifically on the Camp's objectives but were broad and designed to follow-up on information from previous written evaluations. Focus group questions included questions such as the following:

- What is it about Morry's Camp that makes you want to come back?
- How do you think going to Morry's Camp makes you different from kids around you who don't go to Morry's Camp?
- Do you think Morry's Camp has made a difference for you at school?

- Why do you think going to Morry's Camp would be a good thing for your best friend?

The three one-hour focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The Nvivo analysis software for qualitative data analysis was used to manage the text data and emergent coding schemes. The research team used constant comparison techniques for analyses of the focus group data. This technique required that each transcript be read several times for familiarity, and then each research team member began to develop initial coding schemes. The team compared coding perceptions and negotiated to agreement on the few coding differences that had surfaced. The coded transcriptions were read one more time for verification of the codes into twenty emergent themes. Each theme was then analyzed in relation to the Camp's four objectives: positive core values, increased social skills, sense of personal responsibility, and enhanced self-esteem. These comparisons by the research team resulted in seventeen themes that corresponded with the four goals of Morry's Camp. The three themes that did not directly relate to the camp's objectives were the positive influence of the staff, the differences between camp life and city life, and the overall "fun" atmosphere of camp. The implications of these three themes go somewhat beyond the scope of this paper with its focus on the identified camp objectives but were interesting to note.

FINDINGS

The qualitative data collected from the focus groups revealed perceptions and memories about the Morry's Camp experience of these children. One young male camper noted:

> Every time you are coming home from camp you cry and still you have the memories. You have good memories, you have bad memories but that's the good thing about it. Every time you come into Morry's Camp you have memories to remember.

These memories highlighted several key aspects associated with the Camp's stated objectives (i.e., positive core values, increased social skills, enhanced self-esteem, and a sense of personal responsibility) that are detailed in the following sections.

Core Values

Campers' comments that emphasized *respect, leadership, goal setting, and appreciation of the environment* were linked back to the Camp's goal of "building positive core values." A young male camper mentioned that the counselors "Show you to respect yourself and others." A teenage camper mentioned leadership and goal setting:

> When it comes to these goals, like making our leadership better and becoming more tolerant of people, I think they become better because in camp you get to be more open with people. ... You live with somebody for almost a whole month, so in a lot of ways, I think they've taught us a lot when it comes to these goals.

Several of the campers spoke of their appreciation for the environment and enjoyed the beauty and quietness of camp. A young girl was excited that she saw birds that were not pigeons. A camper mentioned that, "what makes me want to come back to Morry's Camp is just getting away from all of these surroundings [city] and just going to a wildlife area." All of these aspects were related to the development of positive values central to the youth.

Social Skills

Another stated objective of the Camp was "increasing social skills." Campers highlighted *teamwork, friendships, appreciating differences, tolerance, manners, and listening* that fit with this objective. A male camper learned about teamwork and friendship and stated, "At camp it's not only you, you have to help each other."

The campers also developed friendships with international counselors, staff from different parts of the United States, and with campers

from around the New York City area. A teen camper noted that, "in camp we get to interact with different people, where in school it's mostly just like us." Another camper spoke about how Morry's Camp had helped enhance her leadership skills as well as her tolerance for others. She said, "I'm like more open to other people's ideas, ...maybe when I don't like when people say things, I understand that maybe they have their reasons why they say that." Several of the boys and girls mentioned that they had learned manners at camp. As stated by one camper, "like when you are sitting at the table, they tell you to say 'please.' And when you're passing things, they tell you to say 'thank you.'"

The campers expressed that staff also stressed the importance of developing listening skills. Campers indicated they learned this skill through circle sharing activities. A camper reiterated learned social skills when he mentioned, "There's less people than in the city and mostly everybody is your friend, so when you see someone you can stop and talk to them." All of these quotes illustrate the children's perceptions about camp experiences that have contributed to improved social skills.

Self-esteem

The campers were proud to boast about their *achievements, self-confidence, and independence*, which subscribed to the camp's goal of enhancing self-esteem. For example, the campers felt achievement in creating their own songs and music that was recorded as Morry's Camp CDs. They also learned new skills during their education club time that they said enhanced their self-esteem. One girl was especially appreciative for the opportunity to learn to swim:

> Morry's Camp gives me self-confidence, because like the first year when I was a freshman, we went swimming and we got swimming lessons. So I was scared to be here because I don't know how to swim. Then when they started teaching me, I started to swim and then from there on, I knew how to swim, and I wasn't afraid of the water anymore.

Another girl was excited about her independence; "...you think you're a grown-up because you do things for yourself." As illustrated by these examples, the children expressed multiple ways that their self-esteem had been enhanced at camp.

Personal Responsibility

The last camp objective examined in relation to the emergent themes from the focus groups was related to developing a sense of personal responsibility. The campers frequently mentioned *accountability, problem solving, service/chores, and patience* during these group interviews. A female camper boasted that she had learned how to resolve her problems and be patient with others:

> Sometimes when you have to use the bathroom, there are four toilets and a lot of people who have to use them, so you have to be patient to use them. You also have to wait for the showers.

A camper also mentioned the Sunday community cleanup:

> On Sundays you do community service. You get a job and you have to clean sometimes the medical area or the dining hall. It's only fair that if we mess it up we should clean it.

One camper described that her parents saw a change in her responsibility level when she returned home. She mentioned that her parents were hesitant to send her back to camp, because they realized how sad she was to come home from camp. Her parents decided to let her return because:

> They noticed that like when it came to responsibility, I really am better about it. I started cleaning more around the house, because in camp they gave us chores. I started clearing off my plate, throwing my dirty laundry in the hamper where it belongs, and you know, things like that and now they're like 'OK go'.

The analysis of themes that emerged from the focus groups clearly indicated that the goals of the camp were met as articulated by the children. This analysis process not only documented the desired outcomes but also provided a richness to the data that would have been missed in more traditional approaches. Through the children's own words, the outcomes were expressed as the lived reality and valued memories of the camping experience.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the focus groups indicated that the campers articulated outcomes that fit within the goals of the camp. The verification of these outcomes was also conceptually important when situated within the youth development literature. The vision and objectives of Morry's Camp appeared to relate to multiple aspects of a broadened agenda for youth development (Pittman et al, 2001), but especially to Bembry's (1998) "Re-creation" model of youth development and programming. Bembry advocated for programmers to meet the basic needs of the child and develop programs to build competencies and core principles. He stressed the importance of the environmental factors of communities, families, individuals/peers, and schools. He noted that practitioners and researchers must move from the risk factor focus to a proactive youth development approach. Bembry's "re-creation" model redefined the role of recreation as a link between youth and community. The model illustrates how social work and recreation principles provide risk-reduction and resiliency as well as enhance the mental and physical well being of youth and communities. Morry's Camp follows this model by examining the campers' protective factors.

Bembry's model highlighted the key principles and potential recreation programs to reach youth. The model focused on relationships among key principles, core competencies, recreation program areas, and ultimate desired outcomes. The five key principles of the model included trust, respect, integrity, consistency, and self-esteem. Bembry suggested these principles increased core competencies, connected youth and communities, and supported youth and families. The core competencies were social, personal, citizenship, belonging, and knowledge. Bembry believed it was essential for recreation professionals to display and instill these principles and competencies within youth. Sports and athletics, culture and diversity, and education and lifelong learning were the three main program areas of the "re-creation" model. The desired outcomes centered on healthy beliefs, opportunities, recognition, bonding, and skill development.

Morry's Camp operates on a prevention and maintenance level according to the "re-creation" model and parallels many of the aspects described by Bembry. The key objectives of Morry's Camp are to instill positive core values, increase social skills, develop a sense of personal responsibility, and enhance self-esteem. The emergent themes became the underlying objectives and desired outcomes. Morry's Camp uses the individual, peers, staff, and camp community structure as tools to instill the key objectives. Circle activities, traditional camp activities, meals, and service projects were just a few of the programs to target these objectives. For example, campers learned positive core values from circle-sharing activities, increased their social skills by learning manners at mealtime, and gained a greater sense of personal responsibility through service projects. Self-esteem was enhanced as the campers learned new skills from camp activities. The campers' examples highlighted specific camp programs and attributes that linked the positive activities and sphere of influence to the key objectives and outcomes. This linkage parallels that found in Bembry's "re-creation" model and adds a new perspective on the ways that a camping experience with a year-round component may add to the youth development literature (see Figure 1).

Several recommendations have evolved from the analysis and interpretation of the campers' focus group data. A methodological recommendation is for camping professionals to consider focus groups as a means of documenting attainment of a camp's goals. This technique expands beyond the scope of traditional surveys and provides a richness and depth that is often missing in quantitative data. Researchers and camping

FIGURE 1
Modified "Re-creation" model (Bembry, 1998) based on camp outcomes

Objectives	Positive Core Values	Increased Social Skills	Greater sense of personal responsibility	Enhanced Self-esteem
Themes	Respect Leadership Goals Environment	Teamwork Friendship Differences Tolerance Manners Listening	Accountability Problem Solving Service Patience	Achievement Independence Self-confidence
Sphere of Influence	Staff	Peer	Camp community	Individual
Positive Activities	Circle sharing	Meals	Service activities	Camp Activities

professionals should collaborate and continue to use techniques such as focus groups, journal writing, and observations that generate qualitative data as well as more traditional survey methods to measure outcomes.

A second recommendation relates to the development of youth development theory and the role of camp research in that process. Camps should be encouraged to situate their evaluations of camper outcomes within the youth development literature. Many camps have outcomes that could inform theories of youth development. As seen in this study of Morry's Camp, the impact of the experience goes beyond the bounds of the camp property. Findings such as the ones described in this study of Morry's Camp speak directly to the critical need articulated by Pittman et al. (2001) to broaden the outcomes, services and opportunities, timing, and settings for positive youth development.

This exploratory study examined focus group data regarding campers' experiences related to the stated objectives of the camp program. Several conclusions were based upon the findings from this study. First, Morry's Camp seems to be meeting its objectives when viewed from the perspectives held by the campers. Campers articulated the values and meaning of camp through their perceptions. These values were aligned with the camp's four main objectives focusing on positive core values, increased social skills, enhanced self-esteem, and a sense of personal responsibility. The objectives became a conscious component to the camp program and a source of focused attention with campers. The objectives were not left to chance to occur but rather were programmed for and discussed with the campers. This intentional objective-driven programming relates to Marsh's meta-analysis (1999) that explored the value of camp. Marsh summarized:

> Camps wishing to expand their program philosophy to include enhancement of self constructs should establish an environment that reinforces the self through positive interactions with others, provides opportunities to achieve success and an environment that provides for a sense of involvement in the camper's experience.

This exploratory study was the first step in a longitudinal study to explore the impact of the camping experience on children from communities at-risk. This first phase was focused on exploring the relationship between memorable and valued experiences at camp and the stated objectives of Morry's Camp. The findings indicated the high degree with which the camp program seemed to reinforce the objectives since the campers expressed in their own words aspects of camp that fit the four objectives of the camp. The long-term values of camping, however, require further exploration and documentation, particularly as to the impact of the experience across the life course. Maybe this thought from a young camper sums it up best:

> Sometimes when you're a grown-up and just came back from work and you're all tired, you can use the Morry's Camp memories to make your smile come back.

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